

***A Floresta que Anda (The Moving Forest)*. dir. Christiane Jatahy. Teatro Nacional Dona Maria II, Lisbon, Portugal**

Reviewed by: *Francesca Rayner*

In Act 5 Scene 5 of *Macbeth*, a startled Messenger informs Macbeth “As I did stand my watch upon the hill/I looked toward Birnam and anon methought/The wood began to move” (5.5 32-34). Hearing this, Macbeth realizes that his sense of infallibility is misplaced: “If this which he avouches does appear,/There is nor flying hence nor tarrying here”. (5.5 46-47) In Christiane Jatahy’s adaptation, Birnam Wood morphed into a technological Forest and the fear that Macbeth senses when it comes towards him created the basis for a collective challenge to the global disorders unleashed by very contemporary tyrants.

When the audience entered the performance space, there were no comfortable seats from which to watch the tragedy of *Macbeth* unfold. Instead, the audience climbed onto the stage itself where there were four viewing screens and a bar in the corner. The screens projected the stories of four individuals; Igor, a Brazilian political prisoner, Michele, a working class Brazilian black woman who saw her uncle murdered by the police in a Rio de Janeiro slum, Aboud, a refugee from the Syrian civil war currently living in Germany and Prosper, a refugee from war in the Congo now living in São Paulo, Brazil. These stories of political persecution and exile were not filmed in conventional documentary style. While the characters narrated their experiences to camera, the visual images focused not on their faces but on fragments of arms, legs, eyes, tables, parakeets, flights of stairs. Their testimonies were interspersed with apparently random comments by mothers, friends and children who strayed into the film. Audience members chose how long they stayed with each of these stories and in which order. They could supplement the viewing with visits to the bar or engage in private conversations.

Some of the members of the audience had been given headsets through which the absent director gave instructions during the performance. While the testimonies in the video installation continued, verbal instructions were relayed to these men and women who played out a series of micro-performances at the

bar. These included a man putting his hand greedily into an abandoned black handbag and then removing the hand covered in blood, a woman washing away the blood on her hands in an aquarium full of water and a man attempting to give away money covered in blood to other members of the audience. In these examples of what Jatahy has referred to as 'invisible performance', the stories were almost imperceptible to those members of the audience who were not wearing headsets and even those wearing them probably missed some of them. The combination of video installations and micro-performances updated but also fragmented *Macbeth* into a series of apparently random events around the themes of murder, corruption and ambition, rather than engaging in a linear retelling of the story.

Suddenly, the four screens came together into a long line as images of hybrid insects, animals and skeletons were projected onto this extended screen. Then, to everyone's surprise, the screens started moving towards the audience, forcing them back towards the bar. As members of the audience read excerpts from *Macbeth*, the images on the screen became those of the audience itself, who had been filmed in real time throughout the performance. What had seemed then playful experiments in audience participation now became compromising footage of complicity in the bloody story of a tyrant and the elimination of those standing in his way. Particularly forceful in this respect were the filmed attempts of the man to give away the money covered in blood. Members of the audience who had accepted the notes as part of the game of performance became, under the scrutiny of the filmed footage, unscrupulous in the extreme, while those who had spent their time simply watching the performances at the bar were cast as unwilling witnesses.

With the audience still reeling from their casting within rather than outside *Macbeth*, an actress narrated a series of statistics about global war and tyranny to contextualize the individual stories on the screens. These ranged from the fact that one adolescent dies every hour in Brazil to the innumerable victims of war and mineral exploitation in the Congo. These global stories of births and deaths ended with the birth of the current Brazilian President Michel Temer, whose undemocratic impeachment of his predecessor, Dilma Rousseff and constant dodging of charges of corruption made him a very contemporary

Macbeth figure. The actress then asked a member of the audience to read with her the exchange between the Messenger and Macbeth in 5.5 about the approach of Birnam Wood. She ended her intervention with the question “How do we change things?” and indicated that the moment when Macbeth learns about the approach of Birnam Wood and first senses his own fear is a pivotal moment in the play and in forging an opposition to the various social, political and ecological catastrophes that characterize the world at the moment. As the screens moved forward towards the audience once again, they dared the audience to retreat or stand their ground. As such, the moving technological forest represented not only the encroachment of political reaction on private and public, local and global spaces, but also the force of a possible resistance to that encroachment by a newly-energized collective made conscious of its power.

The performance ended as it began, with the four stories once more looping on the individual screens. This circular ending was undercut, however, by the lights coming up on the director and her camera crew behind a mirror by the bar, deconstructing the illusion which the performance had itself created. The audience decided whether to watch the testimonies again or leave the theatre. Personally, I found that watching the images had become intolerable by this time and left the theatre almost immediately. In the Q and A after the performance, Jatahy cast herself and her camera crew as contemporary witches, provoking the audience into behaving in ways they might not outside the theatre and then making them responsible for their actions on camera. There have been many performances of *Macbeth* in recent years, reflecting the general political atmosphere of war and terror. However, this performance stood out for me in its implication of the complicity of those who witness or take part in such events and in its call for urgent social, political and theatrical transformation.